

## Vautreau the Vampire.

---

THE person distinguished by this pleasant soubriquet was a picture and bric-à-brac dealer, whose dark, dusty, over-crowded little shop in the Rue de Provence was well known, some fifteen years ago, to every artist and dilettante in Paris.

At the back was an office, still dingier than the shop, where at any time, between the hours of 10 A.M. and 6 P.M., the proprietor might be dimly discerned seated at a high desk, immersed in figures. He was a bachelor, on the wrong side of sixty; small and spare and dry in person, imperturbable in manner, with a grating voice and a sarcastic smile.

Modest as was his establishment, his business was on a very extensive scale, and was not confined to the buying and selling of pictures.

He styled himself "Homme d'Affaires," an elastic title, which covers other callings besides an agent's. For instance, it may mean a usurer; not that we assert M. Vautreau to have been a usurer, any more than the father of the Bourgeois Gentilhomme was a "shop-keeper," but having a good deal of money, and being of an obliging disposition, he lent it to his friends, and in return for the accommodation consented to receive interest which ranged from fifty per cent. upwards. His clients were for the most part brethren of the brush, though there were not a few men of letters, rising doctors, and barristers among them. Talent was his security. He prided himself on discovering at once whether a young man had *de l'avenir*, and his penetration was so seldom at fault that to be "one of Vautreau's men" was a recommendation.

It is true that his enemies—those malicious persons who had nicknamed him the "Vampire"—asserted that Vautreau's men generally came to grief in the long-run, and that more than one promising young artist who had mortgaged to him time, talent, and prospects had ended miserably, bankrupt in all. But such slanders M. Vautreau could afford to disregard. Whoever failed, he flourished; "adding to golden numbers—golden numbers," growing every year more prosperous, envied, and dreaded.

His shop, as has been said, was in the Rue de Provence, but the *appartement* which he had occupied for more than twenty years was

on the Left Bank, in the Rue St. Jacques, that "long unlovely street" which leads from the Quartier des Ecoles to the Observatoire.

Here, and here alone, the money-lender was known by his real name, which was Jules Renault. He had assumed the other as a *nom-de-guerre* when first he began business. His unsociable habits, and the mystery attaching to his occupation, made him suspected by his fellow-lodgers of belonging to the secret police, an idea which he rather encouraged, as it saved him the trouble of making acquaintances. Not half a dozen persons in Paris were aware that the wealthy money-lender of the Quartier d'Antin and the mysterious lodger in the Rue St. Jacques were one and the same individual.

One foggy November evening in the year 1865, he returned to his rooms, after a week's absence from town on business.

Old Françoise, his *ménagère*, was on her knees before the stove, blowing a sulky fire, which had filled the room with smoke, in spite of open door and window.

"*Que diable!* Do you want to smother me?" her master exclaimed, pausing on the threshold.

She grunted something inaudible as she gave the recalcitrant fire a spiteful poke. He shrugged his shoulders and entered, glancing round with a slight shiver. Cheerless enough the room looked in the light of a flickering lamp, with its faded furniture, uncarpeted floor, and bare white panelled walls. Very cheerless; and he was cold and tired, and the smoke and the fog together made his eyes water, and sent him into a paroxysm of coughing.

"Any letters or papers?" he asked when he could speak, as he drew off his gloves. The question was merely *pro forma*; few communications but the tax-collector's ever reached him in the Rue St. Jacques.

"No—yes, by-the-by, there is a letter; it came nearly a week ago—*voilà*."

She nodded towards the chimney-piece. He raised his brows in surprise, and examined the missive curiously before opening it. His face darkened suddenly with a frown.

"Fontainebleau, eh? another 'last appeal,' after an interval of three years. Well, it can follow its predecessors," and he was about to consign it to the fire, unread, when his eye was caught by the address.

"A woman's handwriting—*tiens!* that is something new. Can it be—"

He hesitated a moment, then sat down at the table, drew the lamp towards him, and opened the letter.

"Dear Uncle Jules," it began.

He started, and glanced at the signature—"Edmée Lafeuillade."

"*Bon Dieu*—then Louise left a daughter, and I never knew it!"

It is true I always burnt her husband's letters unread." He turned back to the beginning.

"DEAR UNCLE JULES,—You will be surprised to receive a letter from your unknown niece, but though I am a stranger to you, I cannot feel that you are one to me; dear mother used so often to speak of you, and of the days long ago, when you and she lived together. I know what a grief your estrangement was to her—"

"The estrangement was of her own making," interpolated the reader; "she cut herself adrift from me when she married Victor Lafeuillade, a *vaurien* without a *sou* in his pocket, or an idea in his head, who fancied himself an embryo Raphael—ah, bah!"

"Since my father's death" ("so he is dead? *tiens, tiens!*") "I have been pupil-teacher at Madame Vernier's, but now that she has given up her school I must find another home. I have not, that I know of, a relative in the world but yourself. May I come to you?" ("*Par exemple!*") "I shall not be a burden to you, for though I do not inherit my dear father's genius" ("save the mark!") "I think I paint well enough to earn my own living. Even if I cannot sell my pictures I can always teach. I am compelled to leave here on Tuesday, and if I do not hear from you to the contrary I shall venture to take for granted your permission." ("Tuesday? *Diable!* that is to-day; if I had only known—") "Dear uncle, please let me come to you! I am so lonely, and the world is so wide and so cold.—Your affectionate niece,

"EDMÉE LAFEUILADE."

For some minutes he sat with the letter in his hand, rubbing his chin and staring absently at the last lines. Then, slightly shaking his head, as if in answer to his thoughts, he methodically refolded and restored it to the envelope.

"Out of the question. However, she can stay for a day or two till I can make other arrangements. *Françoise*," he continued aloud, "you must prepare a bedroom for my niece, do you hear? It is likely that she will arrive this evening."

If he had announced that he expected a white elephant she could scarcely have looked more astonished.

"What? your niece? Didn't know you had one."

"I didn't know myself till a few moments ago. Her father is dead, it seems, and has left his child a beggar—but that was to be expected of the man."

"And what are you going to do with the girl?" the old woman inquired sourly, glancing at him over her shoulder. "Keep her here in idleness while you are scraping together money for her to squander when you're dead? Folly!"

"A folly your master is not likely to commit, *ma mie*. My niece will find—hark, what was that?" he broke off.

It was a knock, or rather a modest tap, at the outer door, and it had been twice repeated before it attracted their attention. At the third repetition Françoise obeyed the summons.

A girlish figure, muffled in dark wraps, stood on the threshold.

"Monsieur Renault?" said a young voice, interrogatively.

"*Entrez*," the woman answered, and drew back for her to pass into the room.

The money-lender had hastily moved the lamp, so that the light fell full upon his visitor's features as she entered, leaving his own in shadow.

"Uncle, I am Edmée," she said, and approached him shyly, holding out two little gloved hands, and looking up into his face anxiously, wistfully, with a mixture of hope and fear. He looked at her in return as if she were a ghost; and, indeed, she seemed one to him. With all the heart he possessed he had once loved his young sister, and here was her very self, standing before him, with just that wistful look he knew so well.

"I hope you are not displeased with me for coming," the girl said anxiously, as he did not speak, "but—but I had nowhere else to go. Uncle Jules," she added with a pleading smile, "won't you say that you are glad to see me?"

"I am—you are welcome," he said abruptly, rousing himself, and he just touched her forehead with his lips. "I have been out of town, and have only just received your letter. How did you learn my address?"

"I found it among my father's papers. He wrote to you, I think, shortly before he died?"

"I received a letter—yes. You have brought some luggage, I suppose?"

"The boxes are in the fiacre at the door."

"Go down, Françoise; pay the man, and have them brought up, and then come and see if you can make this fire burn. Pouf! Confound the smoke!"

"It wants a little coaxing," Edmée said quickly, and the next moment she had drawn off her gloves, and was on her knees before the stove.

"I am a very domestic character, Uncle Jules," she said, smiling up at him as she plied the bellows; "the girls used to say I was a housemaid spoilt. There, I think it will do nicely now, and if I had a hearth-brush—ah, *voilà*!" In a twinkling she had made the hearth neat, and rose, looking with satisfaction at her work.

The fire was burning cheerily now, and the flickering blaze brought

out the golden gleams in her fair hair and lighted up her face; a sweet attractive face, full of brightness and courage, yet touched with pensiveness. The features in repose had a faint air of melancholy, as if life's shadows had already fallen upon them.

She took off her hat and glanced round the room.

"And this is your home," she said thoughtfully. "I tried to picture it to myself, but——"

"But your picture was not much like the reality? No, I suppose not, or you would not have been quite so anxious to come to me," was his dry conclusion.

"If I had known before how—how *triste* it was, I should have wanted to come to you long ago," she answered gently.

He scrutinised her keenly under his bent brows.

"Has any one told you—ridiculous rumours get abroad sometimes—that I am a rich man?"

She looked up with the grave innocent wonder of a child, and shook her head.

"No; I always fancied you were poor. It is so, is it not?"

He scraped his chin, looking meditatively between the bars of the stove.

"Umph, well—riches and poverty are comparative terms. I am certainly not so rich as I could wish to be. Few people are, I suppose."

"I am glad you are not rich," Edmée said simply. "I could not have added to your happiness then as I think I can now if you will let me. There is a line in an old poet that I am very fond of: 'Affection is a hardy plant that flourishes best in a poor soil.' Don't you think it's true?"

He took a pinch of snuff, and shrugged his shoulders.

"It may be. I can't tell. Experience has taught me that there is only one kind of affection which it is absolutely safe to believe in."

"What kind is that?"

"The regard every man feels for—himself, and his own interests. 'Self' is the pivot on which the world turns."

She looked up quickly to make sure he was in earnest, then gazed at the fire with a very grave face for several minutes without speaking.

When she raised her eyes to his again they had a look of wistful pity which disconcerted and puzzled him.

"What a sad, sad life yours must have been if you have learned to doubt the very existence of affection," she said softly. "Since my mother left you there has been no one to—ah, yes; I can understand. Poor Uncle Jules!"

She took the hand that hung at his side as he stood near her, and

raised it to her lips, then laid it caressingly against her cheek. He did not withdraw it.

It was an odd, but not unpleasant sensation, the pressure of that soft cool cheek. It was ludicrous, no doubt, that this little "beggar at his gates" should presume to pity him, still he did not resent her compassion. It even dimly occurred to him that he had need of it. Certainly, when he came to think of it, his home was "triste" enough, and his life—

But at this point his reflections were interrupted by Edmée.

"I may stay with you, *n'est-ce pas?*" she whispered.

"You would not be happy here, even supposing I—"

"Indeed, indeed I should. Ah, you don't know how sweet it is, after living among strangers so long, to have some one of one's own kin to love; some one that belongs to me, as you do. Do not send me away—do not!"

She came closer to his side, and clasping her hands on his arm let her head sink on his shoulder.

No words could have moved him as did the mute appeal of those little clinging hands, the confiding pressure of the fair head on his breast. His heart was stirred by an emotion utterly new to him, or, if not new, long forgotten; a feeling which he had thought was buried in his sister's grave.

He put his hand gently under the girl's chin, and for a moment regarded her in silence.

"Stay, then, child, if you will," he said abruptly, and turned from her without another word.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Si tu savais comme je t'aime  
Bien sûr, toi-même tu m'aimeras"

—Edmée sang softly to herself as she sat at her easel. Her brush was seldom idle, and she was delighted to find that her paintings met with a ready sale. It happened so fortunately that "Uncle Jules's" employer was a picture-dealer!

Five months had passed since she came to the Rue St. Jacques; it was now the first week in April. A golden spring evening was drawing to a close; the street below was in shadow, but one slanting ray of sunlight lingered in the room, flickering 'round the girl's head as if loth to leave her.

She wore a knot of violets at her breast, and there were more on the chimney-piece, filling the room with the breath of spring. Pictures and sketches brightened the panelled walls, books and work made a pretty feminine litter on a side-table. The place had acquired that look of home which only a woman's presence can give.

M. Renault sat at his *escriatoire*, writing letters with a rapid pen;

not so absorbed in his correspondence, however, that he could not glance now and then at his companion.

Looking up presently from his task, Edmée met his eyes and smiled, with that bright fearless look of confidence and sympathy which never greeted him on any face but hers.

"Uncle, I wish you would put away those tiresome papers. You ought not to bring the office home with you."

"They are letters which must be answered to-night. You don't want me to get into trouble with my *chef*?"

"He works you too hard; he is a tyrant, that Monsieur Vautreau. Ciel—what a name!" she exclaimed, with a little shrug; "it reminds one of vulture."

He looked up quickly.

"Who told you my—my employer's name?"

She pointed to an envelope, bearing his business address in full.

"Somehow, though I don't know him, I have a prejudice against him," she added.

He glanced at her under his spectacles.

"Not a few persons who do know him, share it, I believe," he remarked drily. "But he has not been a bad friend to me, on the whole. In fact, I may say that everything I possess I owe to 'Monsieur Vautreau.' "

"*Vraiment*? Then I will try to like him.

"'Voux-tu mon cœur? il est à toi.'"

"That song is a favourite of yours," he said, after a pause, writing on. She blushed, for no apparent reason, and was suddenly mute.

"I have heard some one else sing it," he continued, as he folded his letter. "Who was it, now? *Tiens*—I recollect."

She looked up inquiringly.

"No one you know. A client of mine—of ours, I mean. By-the-by, that reminds me, I must look him up to-morrow."

"Is he a painter?" Edmée asked quickly. "I wonder—"

She checked herself, and left the sentence unfinished.

"Yes, he is an artist," her uncle returned, "he paints for—Monsieur Vautreau, as you do. Apropos, Mademoiselle, you ought to speak more respectfully of your patron—"

"Especially as he pays so liberally," she returned, smiling. "Why, we shall be quite rich soon!"

M. Renault took snuff demurely.

"It is his interest to encourage rising talent."

Edmée looked at her work critically with her head on one side, then lifted her pretty shoulders and eyebrows.

"Mine will never rise much above mediocrity, I'm afraid."

" You have a decided gift, and you have been well taught——"

" Yes, by my father, and afterwards by—an artist who was our drawing-master at school. That is one of his sketches," she added, pointing to a water-colour drawing on the wall, a glade in the forest of Fontainebleau.

" A clever study of foliage," he said, glancing at it. " I should say he had talent."

" Genius," she corrected softly, with a proud light in her eyes which her uncle did not see; " he is poor and obscure now, but the world will hear of him some day."

" Well, it may, if he makes noise enough; but if he is timid or modest he may possibly end as many a 'genius' has before him, by dying in a garret."

To that she made no reply, and there was silence till Françoise entered to lay the cloth. M. Renault had taken to dining at home of late, having the dinner sent in from a neighbouring *traiteur's*.

" Have you been downstairs to inquire for letters, Françoise?" Edmée asked, as she began to collect her painting materials.

" I went this morning——"

" But something may have come since."

" Well, mam'zelle, your legs are younger than mine," the old *ménagère* answered bluntly, giving the cloth a flap before she spread it. Edmée laughed.

" Very true; I will go myself," she said pleasantly, and left the room.

" Always asking for letters—*ça m'embête*," grumbled Françoise, under her breath; " and who does she expect to hear from, I want to know?"

" From some of her school-friends, probably. Who else should it be?"

" Humph!" grunted the old woman, with so much significance that her master looked up.

" The last letter she had was directed in a man's handwriting, m'sieu, and the post-mark was Paris, not Fontainebleau. It's my belief the girl has got a lover, and if you——"

" *Tais-toi!*" he interrupted sharply, as Edmée's footstep was heard outside.

The next moment she entered, disappointed.

" You did not find a letter, then?" her uncle inquired, looking at her curiously. She shook her head. " Who is the friend you are so anxious to hear from?" he asked; " some one you knew at Madame Vernier's?"

She blushed and hesitated, glancing at Françoise, who was listening with undisguised curiosity for her reply.

"No—yes, some one I knew at school."

Françoise gave an incredulous sniff, and put down the plates with a clatter.

M. Renault's face darkened ; he turned from the girl abruptly and busied himself with his papers, more hurt than he cared to acknowledge by what he deemed her want of candour.

But in fact she wished nothing more than to take him into her confidence, and was thinking how provokingly it happened that Françoise was present just then. After dinner, when they were alone together, she found it impossible to recur to the subject, for M. Renault produced a formidable-looking account-book, and buried himself in it for the rest of the evening.

"But to-morrow—to-morrow evening I will tell him all," she resolved.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the following morning "Monsieur Vautreau" made his appearance at the shop in a mood which his assistant described in confidence to himself as "massacrante."

To do the money-lender justice, it was but seldom he indulged in such a frame ; as a rule, however he might try other people's tempers, he contrived to keep his own.

At about eleven o'clock he went out, greatly to his subordinate's relief, announcing that he should be absent about an hour.

It was a sweet spring morning, mild and sunny, with a soft breeze, and a limpid blue sky. Paris, with its dazzlingly white house-fronts, its brilliant boulevards, where the trees were just bursting into leaf, its blooming gardens, its fountains splashing and sparkling in the sunshine, its general air of brightness, lightness, and newness, looked like a fairy city, conjured up in a single night.

The money-lender, who never noticed the weather except when it compelled him to wear an overcoat or carry an umbrella, went his way leisurely, with his hands behind him, acknowledging the greetings of passing acquaintances by touching the brim of his hat with his forefinger. Down the Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin, crossing the Boulevard des Italiens, into the once aristocratic Rue Louis-le-Grand. He stopped at a tall, faded-looking house at the further end of the street, with a hairdresser's shop on the ground-floor. Toiling up four flights of slippery stairs, he paused at a door, on which was nailed a card with the inscription : "Léon Leclerc ; Artiste-Peintre," and applied his knuckles very discreetly to the upper panel.

His modest summons meeting with no response, he opened the door a few inches and looked in.

A large light bare room, unfurnished, except for a small pallet bed in one corner, and the usual litter of an artist's studio ; easels,

canvases, a lay figure half smothered in drapery, dusty plaster casts, and anatomical drawings.

Near the window was a tall easel supporting a half-finished picture, and before it, in a paint-stained holland blouse, and down-at-heel slippers, with his dark hair in disorder about his forehead, sat the artist, Léon Leclerc.

He was a tall slight young fellow of four- or five-and-twenty, with a handsome olive face, mobile lips, and "dark eyes full of dreams" under fine level brows. There were haggard shadows under his eyes, and between the brows was that upright furrow which is so pathetic in a young face, telling as it does of some deep-seated grief or gnawing care.

He had pallet and brushes in hand, but he was not painting. He sat with one elbow on his knee, in a listless attitude, pulling the ends of his long moustache, and staring moodily at the picture before him.

The visitor, after watching him a few moments in silence, coughed to attract his attention. He started and turned, and seeing who it was rose and made a hasty movement as if he would have concealed the picture. He checked himself, however, and stood with the colour mantling in his dark cheek, looking with an expression, half proud, half defiant, and altogether hostile, at the intruder.

"*Bon jour, Monsieur Leclerc. I startled you, I fear,*" the latter began, in his dry deliberate tones, as he entered and closed the door.

"I did not hear you knock."

"No, you were—h'm—busy. *Tiens, tiens,* what is this?" he continued, approaching the easel. "I have not seen this canvas before."

Léon dabbed some more colour on his palette and began to paint with sudden energy.

"I know you have not. I did not intend you to see it till it was exhibited in the Salon."

His companion gave him an odd look under his bent brows.

"Ah, *vraiment?* it was not intended for me, then? Humph!"

He adjusted his spectacles with great nicety, and backed away from the picture till he got it at the proper focus.

It represented a street of sombre stone houses in mediæval Florence; in the foreground were the figures of three ladies, advancing towards the spectator; two were clad in rich dark draperies, the third, who walked between her companions, in spotless white. The face of this figure was unfinished. At the side, in the shadow of a heavy portico, stood a youth, who was gazing at the maiden in white with a look of rapt and passionate admiration.

"The meeting of Dante and Beatrice," the artist explained, "from a passage in the 'Vita Nuova.' There is the book on the table."

The money-lender took up the volume—a French translation—and read aloud, in a monotonous voice, “‘ This wonderful creature appeared to me in white robes between two gentle ladies who were older than she, and passing by in the street she turned her eyes upon me, and in her ineffable courtesy saluted me so graciously, that I seemed then to see the heights of all blessedness.’ I see. Yes. Humph!”

The artist gave a furtive anxious glance at his face, but his features might have been carved in wood for any clue they gave to his thoughts.

“ It is nearly finished, I see,” he remarked at length, “ when you have painted in the face of your Beatrice——”

“ I have painted it half a dozen times already, but I can’t satisfy myself,” the young man returned, with a quick, impatient sigh. “ I know the face I want; I see it before me always—always! but there is something in it that eludes me; something pensive, spiritual; a grace too subtle to be fixed on canvas.”

He looked musingly at the picture, seeming to forget his companion, who was watching him steadily, taking a long-drawn pinch of snuff meanwhile.

The lines about his mouth looked ominously grim. At length he shut his snuff-box with a sudden snap, and took off his spectacles.

“ Monsieur Leclerc,” he said abruptly, “ allow me to remind you that this is the sixth of April.”

“ *Déjà!*” the artist exclaimed, coming out of his reverie with a start.

“ Has time flown so quickly with you? Truly, I am glad to hear it. Yes, the day has come round, and——”

“ And we go through the old form again, I suppose?” the other added listlessly, producing pens and ink.

“ Well, no; I think I will not trouble you. I do not feel disposed to renew the bill again. I—in short, I want my money.”

The artist looked at him aghast.

“ *Bon Dieu!* Monsieur Vautreau, you cannot be in earnest!”

“ I never joke—in business,” was the dry reply.

“ But you know that I could as well pay the national debt as pay what I owe you at such short notice. Besides, you are breaking faith with me. The understanding was that you would take pictures instead of money, and——”

The usurer interposed with uplifted finger. “ Pardon. The understanding was that so long as you painted for me, and for me alone, I would forgive you the interest, and not press you for the principal.” He darted his finger at the picture. “ You meant to steal a march upon me, *hein?* Ah, bah, don’t talk of breaking faith after that.”

“ I wanted to have it exhibited; I had a particular reason—— But

I have worked for you like a galley-slave for the last three years, and you know well that my pictures have more than paid the debt. *Allons!* be frank ; if I were to die to-morrow, couldn't you sell them for triple what you——”

“ If you were to die to-morrow—perhaps ; but you are not going to do me that good turn,” the money-lender answered pleasantly. “ Frankly,” he added, as he took up his hat, “ I have enough of your pictures. They have fallen off, of late, and I am beginning to fear, do you know, that you have mistaken your vocation.”

Léon bit his lip.

“ And yet it is not long since you——”

“ Prophesied great things of you ; I remember. But I did not know then how weak you were, how impatient, how easily disengaged. And I did not know,” he added with a sour smile, “ that you had other preoccupations. Art is an exacting mistress, Monsieur Leclerc ; she brooks no divided allegiance. She has no smiles for a suitor who sits idly dreaming of other loves while daylight fades, and his colours dry.”

The artist flushed, and frowned.

“ I cannot alter my circumstances or my character,” he answered shortly.

“ Then I should advise you to change your profession,” was the usurer’s reply, as he moved towards the door.

Léon threw down his palette and brushes with an angry laugh.

“ *Parbleu!* and what occupation should you suggest, Monsieur Vautreau ? Shall I turn oil and colour-man, or add painting and glazing to my present profession ?”

“ You might do worse. In any case you will be kind enough not to forget that little matter of business. In a week’s time I shall expect to hear from you ; if I do not—you will hear from me. *Bon jour.*”

“ Stay, listen !” the artist pleaded, very pale and grave now, following him to the door ; “ be reasonable. It is your own interest not to press me too hard ; I——”

“ *Bon jour,*” repeated the other.

“ Give me time, at any rate ; let me have a chance of——”

“ *Bon jour,*” reiterated the money-lender for the third time, as he passed out.

He paused on the threshold to launch one Parthian shaft.

“ You might as well have let me have your picture, you see. It will probably be in my possession this time next week.”

The young man uttered a passionate inarticulate exclamation, and snatching up a brush loaded with colour dashed it across the canvas.

"There—take it now, if you like!" he said recklessly.

But the sudden gust of passion subsided in a moment; the brush fell from his hand; he gazed in a sort of horror at the defaced picture. What had he done? It seemed as if he had killed a living creature, the companion of his solitude, the confidant of all his hopes.

"That is a finishing touch with a vengeance," was his companion's sarcastic comment.

"Ay—in more senses than one," he answered quietly; his face had grown suddenly calm and white; "finis to my work and my hopes. '*Adieu—réves, illusions, vanités!*'"

And without another glance at the defaced canvas, he took it from the easel, and turned it face to the wall.

The money-lender shrugged his shoulders, and left the room.

"A hasty young fool! The best picture he has painted yet. He had no right to cheat me of it," he muttered, as he descended the stairs.

Still, he felt uncomfortable. Léon's white despairing face haunted him like a reproach. He wished he had not been quite so hard with the lad, who, after all, had done him good work, though he had fallen into dreamy, dilatory ways of late. A word of encouragement might have set him right again. He tried to dismiss the thought, but it clung to him all the rest of the day, disturbing him with a vague remorse.

That evening he left business earlier than usual, reaching home before six o'clock.

The lamp was not lighted in the sitting-room, and Edmée sat at the open window, looking out dreamily into the soft spring dusk.

She turned towards him with a welcoming smile as he entered, but did not speak, and soon resumed her dreamy gaze into the twilight.

There was something forlorn in the lonely little figure, dimly outlined against the waning light.

He had felt vexed and disappointed the night before, but his resentment all died out at the sight of her.

He came to her side and laid his hand lightly on her shoulder.

"Dreaming, Edmée?"

She took the hand, and pressed it to her cheek with her favourite little caress.

"No, I have been thinking. Thinking many thoughts, and some of them sad ones."

"You have a trouble that you will not tell me," he said, as he took his seat beside her.

"I am going to tell you now, Uncle Jules; I do not wish to have

a secret from you. Yesterday, when you asked me who it was I expected to hear from, we were not alone, or I should have told you that—that it was not a school-friend, but some one dearer than a friend—dearer to me than any one in the world, except yourself."

"Except myself; are you sure there is any exception?" he questioned, with a grave smile. "Well, well! And who is this mysterious *quelqu'un*?"

"He is an artist. When his mother was living they were our neighbours at Fontainebleau. Afterwards he removed to Paris, but he still taught at Madame Vernier's, so that I saw him often. My father knew that we loved each other, but before he died he made Léon promise that he would not ask me to marry him while he was still poor. He himself had known the bitterness of poverty—*mon pauvre père!* he had seen my mother wasting away in—"

Her voice faltered, and the tears rushed to her eyes.

Her companion compressed his lips as if in pain. Edmée did not know what a pang of remorse her words sent through his heart. There was a moment's silence, then he asked suddenly: "What did you say his name was—this artist?"

"Léon Leclerc."

He pushed back his chair with an exclamation.

"You know him?" she said quickly. "Ah, I can guess. He paints for Monsieur Vautreau, *n'est-ce pas?* and it was he whom you heard singing my song. Have you seen his pictures, Uncle Jules? are they not beautiful? is there not a brilliant future before him?"

"I—yes, I think so," he acquiesced mechanically, hardly conscious of what he said. Léon Leclerc Edmée's lover! He could not realise it.

"If only he does not lose heart," she went on; "when I heard from him a month ago he seemed depressed and anxious; I fear he had been working too hard. He was busy with a new picture, which he hoped to finish in time to send to the Salon. He promised to write again and tell me how it was progressing, but—*tiens!*" she broke off, leaning forward to look out of the window, "there is the *facteur* coming to the house. Perhaps he has a letter for me."

She left the room at once, and in a very few moments returned, breathless from her hurried run downstairs, with a bright flushed face, and a letter in her hand, which she held up triumphantly.

"At last! I had a presentiment that it would come to-day."

She hastily lighted the lamp, and sat down at the table to read it. But before she could open the envelope, her uncle rose suddenly and laid his hand on hers.

"Edmée—do not read that letter, or, at least, let me see it first."

She looked up at him in wonder.

"Why may I not read it, Uncle Jules? Do you—"

"I too have a presentiment," he returned, with a forced smile; "I fear it may contain bad news. *Voyons donc*—if you will give it me unread, I will call upon Léon to-morrow, and—and later, you shall see him."

She flushed and paled; holding the letter tightly folded in her hands.

"I cannot," she whispered, "I must read it. If he is in trouble——"

He turned from her without another word, and walked to the window, where he stood with folded arms looking out into the dusky street. Very shortly an exclamation from Edmée made him look towards her again.

She was very pale, all the brightness had faded from her face.

"Oh, Uncle Jules, you were right: this is bad news indeed! He writes to—to bid me farewell. All his hopes are wrecked, he says, and—he is in some dreadful trouble, but he does not explain—stay, what is this?"

She glanced over the last page and read aloud: "I once thought poverty the worst of evils, but I know now that a man has not tasted the 'dregs of bitterness' till he is in debt. My first step towards ruin was taken when I crossed the threshold of"—"mon Dieu!"—"of Vautreau, the usurer."

She looked up blankly at her companion.

"What does it mean? Surely that is not—not your——"

"Give me the letter," he interrupted, and took it from her hand. Standing so that she could not see his face, he read the hastily scrawled lines, which had evidently been written immediately after his interview with the artist that morning. His own name was mentioned in terms which brought the blood to his dry cheek. But the letter breathed more despair than bitterness.

"Adieu, Edmée!" it concluded; "I must not let you waste your life in waiting for a day which may never dawn, though in saying farewell to you I part from all that makes life sweet."

"If I rashly part from life itself, forgive me, my beloved, and forget me."

M. Renault crushed the paper in his hand and looked up.

"I will go to him," was all he said.

"Take me with you!" Edmée pleaded; "I want to see him—to tell him——"

"You shall see him, but I cannot take you with me. I must speak to him first alone."

"Then will you bring him back with you?" she entreated, clinging to his arm.

"I—yes. I will bring him," he answered slowly, and was silent a

moment, looking into the sweet earnest face upraised to his. He was thinking that perhaps he should never see that look of love and trust upon it again.

"Kiss me, child!" he said suddenly.

Wondering a little, she obeyed, pressing her lips to his cheek again and again.

"She shall be happy—it will atone," he muttered, and the next moment he was gone.

His heart was heavy and anxious as he hurried on through the dusky streets. Should he find Léon? that was the doubt which oppressed him. He did not believe—he would not believe—that the young man would carry out his vague threat of self-destruction, but perhaps in his reckless, despairing mood he had quitted his lodgings, leaving no clue to his whereabouts.

The money-lender hailed the first fiacre that passed him, and drove to the Rue Louis-le-Grand.

Before going upstairs he looked into the concierge's close little *loge*, where a brown buxom woman in a white cap was frying an omelette over the stove.

"Do you know whether I shall find Monsieur Leclerc at home?"

"He is gone, monsieur," she answered, over her shoulder, in a high cheery voice.

"Gone out?"

"Gone away—gone for good," she corrected, coming forward, frying-pan in hand. "He came down about an hour after you called this morning, and paid his term, and gave me the key of his room. I was to give it to you when you called again, he said. The things he left belonged to you."

"Had he any luggage?"

"A hand-bag—nothing more."

"And he did not say where he was going?"

She shook her head.

"He had been writing a letter, and he asked me to stamp and post it for him, as he had 'no change.' I don't believe he had a *sou* in his pocket—*le pauvre garçon!* I wanted to lend him a few francs, but he would not take them. He was in great trouble, that is certain: he looked quite upset."

She could tell him nothing more, and he went out into the street again. The evening was chill and gloomy; a drizzling rain was falling. He stood looking right and left, knowing not which way to turn. Where, in all the great labyrinth of Paris, was he to look for the poor lad whom he had driven to despair?

"Where now, *mon bourgeois?*" the driver demanded, examining the end of his whip with philosophic indifference.

"To the *Café des Arts*, in the Rue du Helder," he answered, throwing himself into the carriage again. He did not expect to find Léon there, but he might meet with some one who knew him, and had seen him since morning. He was disappointed, however. He found more than one who knew the artist well, but none who had seen him that day, or for many days previously.

"He has grown unsociable of late," they told him; "he cares for no company but his 'Beatrice.'"

His inquiries at other well-known artists' haunts in the neighbourhood met with the same result. He then drove to the nearest dépôt of police, and stated the case to the superintendent, who took down the artist's "signalement," and promised cheerfully that, "living or dead," he should be found before morning.

There was nothing more to be done, but he could not return home alone; he dismissed the fiacre, and continued his search on foot, wandering aimlessly through the busy brilliant streets, where the shop-windows glittered through the rain, and the long lines of gas-lamps were reflected in the wet pavements.

Nearly four hours had passed in this way, and he was wet through, and tired out, when he found himself on the Pont aux Doubles, under the solemn shadow of *Notre Dame*, whose clock had just struck ten.

The rain had ceased, and the moon gleamed fitfully through broken and dispersing clouds. The water was touched with a tremulous lustre, and when a little flaw of wind struck the surface every ripple had a silvery edge.

The bridge was deserted except for a solitary loiterer like himself, leaning with folded arms on the parapet, at a little distance.

Something in the man's figure and attitude struck him as familiar. He scrutinised him for a moment with growing hope, then moved towards him. He soon saw that he had not been deceived by a chance resemblance. It was Léon who stood there, looking down gloomily at the river. Absorbed in his thoughts, he did not perceive the other's approach till he felt a hand on his shoulder, then he started and looked round.

"Monsieur Vautreau!"

"I thought I was not mistaken," the latter returned composedly; "this is a fortunate chance; I have just been to your rooms, and was disappointed to find you from home. Are you walking my way?"

Without waiting for an answer, he linked his arm firmly within the artist's; but Léon drew back.

"No—I am not going your way, whatever it is. For the future our paths lie apart, if you please."

"For the future, so be it. But for the present I ask you as a

favour to give me your company for a few minutes. Are you so bitter against me that you cannot grant me that simple request?"

"I am not bitter against you," the young man answered, in a weary tone, moving on with him mechanically. "I am too wretched to be angry. Despair leaves no room for resentment."

"Despair?" ta, ta, ta!" his companion responded with cheerful contempt; "despair at five-and-twenty, with all the world before you; with talent, health, good looks, and—*pour comble de bonheur*—the love of the sweetest girl in Paris!" Léon stopped short in sheer astonishment.

"How do you know—" he began.

"How do I know that Edmée loves you? On good authority, *parbleu!* I had it from her own lips not many hours ago. I was not aware till then, Monsieur Leclerc, that you were my niece's fiancé."

The artist stared at him.

"Your niece! Edmée's uncle is Monsieur Renault," he stammered.

"Yes, that is my name, out of business. 'Vautreau' does just as well for a signboard."

"And—and does she know that—"

"That 'Uncle Jules' and Monsieur Vautreau are one? No; that is my secret—was, I mean, for I suppose—of course you will tell her the truth."

He glanced furtively at the young man's face, but Léon said nothing; he seemed hardly yet recovered from his surprise.

"If I had any claim to your forbearance," his companion went on after a pause, "I might ask you to be mercifully silent, to let me keep unshaken the love and trust of the only creature who—"

There was an odd break in his voice, and he added abruptly, with a change of tone, "But I have no such claim. Come, let us walk on. I promised Edmée to bring you. Nothing short of seeing you will set her mind at ease, after your letter."

"I was half distracted when I wrote it," he muttered, apologetically, "after I had hoped so much, it was crushing to fail; to feel that I had—"

"*Allons donc!* you have not failed. Courage and patience are all you need. Courage to work; patience to wait. You must restore your picture and send it to the Salon. You will soon finish your Beatrice when you have the original to paint from—hein? Stop that fiacre and tell the man 'Rue St. Jacques, 39 bis.' "

\* \* \* \* \*

Edmée had been waiting and watching in a fever of suspense and anxiety. She heard their footsteps on the stairs, and came out on to the landing.

Seeing Léon, she uttered a tremulous cry of joy, which he echoed, and the next moment she was clasped in his arms.

M. Renault watched them as they passed into the sitting-room, oblivious of himself and all the world, then gently closed the door upon them and went to his own bedroom.

He struck a match, and lighted a candle and sat down at the table, with his hands folded before him.

He tried to think over the events of the evening, but he could not; he could only listen to the sounds in the next room.

“He will tell her—of course he will. He has told her by now. She knows who I am, Vautreau the usurer, Vautreau the ‘Vampire’—how many pleasant titles of the sort have I, I wonder?”

He could picture the change in the girl’s face; the look of wonder and incredulity, giving place to one of disappointment—disgust . . . His heart contracted with a pang so keen it was like physical pain.

He seemed not to have realised before how dear she had become to him, how she had taken root in his heart and his home, filling them with a “sweetness and light” never known to him before. A dreadful sense of desolation settled upon him, he felt like one who stands on a forlorn and distant shore, and sees all he loved floating away from him across the waste of waters.

A tap at the door roused him. It was Léon. His face was flushed, there was a smile on his lips, and a light of new hope in his eyes.

“I am glad you are come,” the elder man said, before he could speak; “I wanted to have a little talk with you. But first”—he took out his pocket-book, and selected one paper from those it contained—“first, oblige me by burning this. I will tell you what it is afterwards.”

He twisted it and handed it to his companion, who, after a hesitating glance at him, lighted it at the candle. As the scorched paper unfolded, the artist caught a glimpse of the writing.

“What! it is my own note of hand you have made me burn.”

“Just that, so we are quits. As you truly said this morning, your pictures have more than covered the debt. There is a handsome balance due to you, which I will return on condition that you take Edmée with it.”

Léon seized his hand.

“Ah, Monsieur Renault, you have released me from one obligation only to lay me under another, which I can never repay. Let me call Edmée——”

“No, stay—not yet!” he interrupted. “Now that she knows I am—what do you say?” he broke off; “you have not told her?”

“I have told her nothing except that you found me just now when

I was in despair, and brought me back to hope and happiness—and here she comes to thank you," he concluded, as just then Edmée entered the room.

"But how shall I find words?" the girl exclaimed, throwing her arms round her uncle's neck. "Ah, I never can be grateful enough! But, dear uncle," she added seriously, "how I wish you were not in the service of that dreadful——"

"Not a word against Monsieur Vautreau, if you please," Léon interrupted. "Uncle Renault has shown me that I was quite mistaken in his character. The fact is he is an impostor, a lamb in wolf's clothing."

"But Edmée shall have her wish," her uncle added. "I have served a hard master quite long enough, and now I intend to take 'ease with dignity.' Françoise shall have a retiring pension, and we will look out for a snug little house in the suburbs, where—*tiens*, I am getting on fast. All that is in the future. For the present, as I don't seem to recollect having dined to-day, with your permission I will have some supper."

"And we will drink success to that rising young artist, Monsieur Léon Leclerc," said Edmée, demurely.

"And confusion to Monsieur Vautreau!" put in her uncle.

"No, no," she cried gaily, "prosperity to Monsieur Vautreau; we can afford to forgive him now. *Allons*, messieurs!"

---